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Shepherd Psalm

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The
Shepherd
Psalm

DR. R. A. TORREY

The Shepherd Psalm

By R. A. TORREY

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Jehovah is My Shepherd

THE Twenty-third Psalm is a great deep. It is an unfathomable ocean of truth. It is the first Scripture that most of us ever learned, but no one of us in a lifetime has ever exhausted it, or gotten to the bottom of it. Volumes have been devoted to the exposition of this Psalm, but who that has ever studied it would dream of saying, "I now have all that there is in the Twenty-third Psalm." It is a short Psalm, but there is material in it for the meditation of a lifetime. How comes it that there are such treasures and such depths of truth in so small a space? There can be but one reasonable answer to that question, viz., God is its Author. It is often contended by the critics that David could not have written it because it is so far beyond him and so far beyond his time. Doubtless it is beyond David, far, far beyond him, and far beyond his time, but can the critics tell us what man of any time that any one has

ever dreamed of assigning the Psalm to, the Psalm is not beyond? But the Psalm is not beyond God, and its inexhaustible depth and matchless beauty and perennial power are clear proof that God is the Author of the Psalm.

There are two methods of dividing the Psalm that suggest themselves from a study of the Psalm itself. According to the first method we divide it into two parts: the first part, verses 1-4, **Jehovah, my Mighty and Tender Shepherd**; the second part, verses 5, 6, **Jehovah, my Bountiful Host**. According to the second method of dividing the Psalm, we divide it into three parts: Part 1, verses 1-3, **Every Want Met**; part 2, verse 4, **Every Fear Banished**; part 3, **Every Longing Satisfied**.

I. EVERY WANT MET

1. The foundation thought of this part of the Psalm, as well as the next, is found in the opening words, **"Jehovah is my Shepherd."** The figure of the Shepherd is one of frequent occurrence in the Bible. It was a favorite illustration with our Lord Himself. The figure stands for love and care and protection and provision on God's

part, and for trust and obedience and following on man's part (John 10:1, 18, 26-29; Gen. 33:13; Luke 2:8; 4:5, 6; Acts 20:29; Isa. 53:6; Matt. 9:36). To say Jehovah is my Shepherd is to say that He loves me with the tenderest love. How an eastern shepherd loves his sheep is brought out in Luke 15:4-6. How the Lord loves His sheep is brought out in John 10:11, "I am the good Shepherd, the good Shepherd layeth down His life for the sheep," and in John 10:3, 4, "To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. When he hath put forth all his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice." Because "Jehovah is my Shepherd" He loves me, He will secure my safety and my welfare even if it takes the sacrifice of Himself, as indeed it did. To say "Jehovah is my Shepherd" is to say that I am the subject of His ever-watchful and tender care. When Jacob was a shepherd he took wonderful care of his flock. He carefully guarded the length and swiftness of a day's march lest he overdrive the flock and some of the feeble ones die (Gen. 33:13), and in the same way our

infinitely wise Shepherd, who never makes mistakes, shapes all His dealings with us with regard to our weaknesses. He never overdrives us. Since "Jehovah is my Shepherd" He will protect me and therefore I need not fear the lion, or the bear, or the wolf, or the devil and all his hosts; for my Shepherd is ever at hand and is ever mighty and will deliver me out of their mouth and their paw (cf. 1 Sam. 17:34-37). All I need to see to is that I am one of His sheep, and therefore can rightly say, "Jehovah is my Shepherd." To say "Jehovah is my Shepherd" is also to say, Jehovah will provide for me, that he will find me good and sufficient pasturage. It is a shepherd's business to feed the sheep and the lambs, and by making Himself my Shepherd Jehovah has undertaken to make it His business to provide me pasture and He will do it; so no wonder the Psalmist continues, "**I shall not want.**" Who has a right to say "Jehovah is my Shepherd?" Everybody? Most assuredly not. There are certain well defined and clearly stated conditions of being one of Jehovah's sheep, and only those who meet the conditions have a right to say, "Jehovah is my Shepherd." But all can meet the conditions. What these conditions are

we find in John 10:3, 4, 5, 27, "To him the porter openeth; and the sheep **hear his voice**: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. When he hath put forth all his own, he goeth before them, and **the sheep follow him**: for they know his voice. And a **stranger will they not follow**, but **will flee from him**: for they know not the voice of strangers. **My sheep hear my voice**, and I know them, and **they follow me.**" We see here that the conditions of being Jehovah's sheep are, first, that we "**hear His voice,**" i. e., that we listen and attend to what Jehovah has to say. The man who is neglecting the voice of Jehovah as it speaks in the Bible and through His Spirit, and the man who refuses to attend to that voice, has no right to repeat the Twenty-third Psalm and say, "Jehovah is **my** Shepherd." Second, that we "**follow Him.**" The one who is not following the Lord has no right to say "Jehovah is **my** Shepherd." Third, that we **heed not the voice of strangers, but flee from them.** The man or woman who is willing to go after and listen to every "**new gospel**" spinner that comes along, has no right to say, "Jehovah is **my** Shepherd." The Lord's sheep will not follow a stranger, but

flee from him. Two persons were once looking over the Bible together as the Twenty-third Psalm was read. One took out a pencil and drew a mark under the third word, "my." At the close of the service the other said, "Why did you draw that line under 'my?'" The other replied, "The Lord is MY Shepherd, and I wondered if He were yours."

2. "I shall not want." These words are the logical outcome of those which precede. If Jehovah is my Shepherd, of course, "I shall not want." How can I? There will be no lack of any kind in the life of the one who makes Jehovah his Shepherd. But what shall I not want? The Bible is full of answer to this question (Ps. 84:11; 34:9, 10; Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:33; Rom. 8:32; Heb. 13:5, 6). Not one of Jehovah's sheep will ever lack anything that it is for his real good to have. Is not that a comforting thought? I would rather have that sure promise of God than all the money and lands and friends and honors in America. "Jehovah, God, is a sun and shield: Jehovah will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11). "And my God shall supply every need of yours, accord-

ing to His riches in glory, in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). We may seem sometimes to "want": there are things we desire and do not get, but the reason we do not get them is because it is not good for us to get them under the existing conditions. Perhaps it would be good for us to get them if we would ask for them in God's way. It is often true of us that we have not because we ask not (Jas. 4:2, 3).

3. Now the Psalmist leads on from the general statement that we shall not want, to specific wants supplied. In verse 2 we have four wants supplied: rest, and food, and drink, and leading, are provided, "**He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.**" Literally translated, this verse would read, "He maketh me to lie down in **pastures of tender grass**; He leadeth me beside **the waters of rest.**" We find a two-fold rest in this verse, that passive rest of the sheep lying down on the soft, young spring grass; the active rest, walking beside the waters of rest. And just so there is a two-fold rest in the Christian life, passive rest, just lying on Jesus' bosom; active rest, in serving the Lord, "without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our

life" (Luke 1:47, 75). This two-fold rest comes out also in Matt, 11:28, 29, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly of heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." The Shepherd himself it is who best knows when we would better lie down in tender grass, and when we would better be led on beside the waters of rest, and it is He who makes us lie down, and it is He who leads.

But there is food as well as rest, "tender grass," the sweet, juicy grass of springtime, such as the sheep love. Where do we find it? Is there any food so easy to eat, so juicy, so delicious, so nutritious as that which we find in the Word of God? Surely there is nothing that one of the Lord's sheep enjoys like this. Perhaps a goat enjoys tin cans and billposters and old boots better than tender grass, and so there are worldlings who enjoy the latest novel or the daily paper better than the Bible, but the sheep prefer the tender grass of God's Word.

But there is drink as well as food, Jehovah leads His sheep right beside "the waters of rest." There is always water at hand for Jehovah's

sheep to drink, refreshing, tranquil waters, not turbulent, turbid waters, "the waters of rest." What are these waters of rest that our Shepherd gives us to drink? We are not left to speculate. Our Lord Himself has interpreted it; from John 4:14 compared with John 7:37-39 we find that the Holy Spirit is the water that we drink. How sweet and delicious these waters are some of you know from the experiences of your own life. But why is this water called "waters of rest?" The answer is found in Gal. 5:22, 23, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control."

But there is guidance too, "He leadeth Me." Not only are the still waters there, but it is Jehovah Himself who leads us along the bank. To me the thought of Jehovah's leading is one of the most precious thoughts of the Psalm, or indeed, of the whole Bible.

"He leadeth me, O precious thought

O words with heavenly comfort fraught!

Whate'er I do, where'er I be,

Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me."

And He leads constantly by the "waters of rest," i. e., the supply of the Spirit is always at hand

for a fresh drink. Some years ago He led me right up to the waters of rest and what a drink I took, it seemed then as if I would never need another, but this past week or two He has been leading me along the same bank again and I have found the waters deeper than I thought. It is to be noted that Jehovah **leads**, not drives, His sheep. It is to be noted also in this and the following verses that there are four experiences into which and in which He leads: first by waters of rest; second, in paths of righteousness, i. e., a holy walk; third, into and through darkness and peril and testing; fourth, into His own house forever.

In verse 3 we have a fifth want supplied, i. e., healing in reviving, or invigorating: "**He restor-eth (or reviveth) my soul.**" Sheep grow weary and weak and so do we; but we do not need to remain weary or weak or sickly, there is a Revivor or Invigorator, and this Revivor or Invigorator is Jehovah Himself. As the shepherd kneels beside the weary sheep and nurses it back to life and strength, so Jehovah does with us. Most of us can look back to times when we grew cold, and our spiritual life waned, and then the gentle Shepherd came and revived us, **restored** our

souls. Many of us can say with David, "Thy gentleness hath made me great" (2 Sam. 22:26). There may be some sheep who reads these words who needs reviving today. Well, the Lord is ready to revive. You need not drag yourself along half dead. There is not only life for us, but fullness of life. Jesus our Shepherd says, "I came that they may have life, and that they may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). It is by His Word especially that Jehovah restores the soul (Ps. 19:7, R. V.).

And now we have a sixth want supplied, guidance, "He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." We have already had guidance in verse 2, but this is a different guidance; there it was guidance by the "waters of rest," here it is guidance in a holy walk.

"Paths of righteousness" literally translated would be "paths of straightness." We will never walk in straight paths without His guidance. Left to ourselves we make very crooked paths, but He guides us **straight** on from the pit of sin to the glory of God. "What shall I do, what shall I do," many are asking, "that I may be sure that I walk in the right path?" Let Him guide you, no need of care, no need of anxiety lest you

are going the wrong way, no need of reproaching of a morbid conscience, just put your whole life into His hands for Him to lead (cf. Rom. 8:15). "He guideth," just rest there, poor troubled, tempest-tossed soul. He leads a step at a time; it is far better to have His daily, hourly, momentary guidance than to have the way all mapped out. Personal guidance is better than a charted course, for we might misread the chart; but He guides, no mistakes now. These paths of righteousness in which He guides are pleasant paths. Some fancy that the paths of selfishness and sin and worldly pleasure in which a silly sheep might wander are pleasanter, but it is not so. No paths so beautiful, no paths so bright, no paths so delightful, as the paths of righteousness (Prov. 3:17).

It is well to notice the order of God's supply of our wants as given in this Psalm: First, rest, then food, then life-giving water, then the invigorating of our lives. These all precede the holy walk. This is the order of experience; the Lord gives us rest, then He feeds us, then we walk beside the living waters and drink often and deep, then the life is revived or invigorated, and then comes the holy walk before men. There

are many who are trying to walk in paths of righteousness before they get the strength for it that comes from finding rest in the Lord and then feeding on the tender grass of the Word and drinking the life-giving waters of the Spirit, and being invigorated by the Lord Himself.

Before we leave this verse let us note why it is that Jehovah does all this, "**for His name's sake.**" Not because of any merit of ours, not because of any claims the sheep have upon Him, but just because of what He Himself is, just because of His own sovereign love and His covenant with His people does Jehovah do these things. I am glad the Psalmist added these words, "for His name's sake," and that Jehovah's care of me, and provision for me, and love to me, rests not on what I am, but on what He is. I am so changeable, He is so changeless. I am not the same for two consecutive minutes, He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). And He gives rest and food and drink and guidance and reviving, and leads me in paths of righteousness **for His name's sake**, because of His own eternal unchangeable love.

II. EVERY FEAR BANISHED.

There is but one verse in this division of the Psalms, but oh what a verse.

1. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." The Lord's sheep is now taken into new experiences, having been made to "lie down in pastures of tender grass," and led "beside the waters of rest," and "led in paths of righteousness," he is now led into "the valley of the shadow of death." The Hebrew word translated "shadow of death" is of frequent occurrence in the Old Testament and is used to express the deepest darkness. The Psalmist did not have merely the experience of literal death in mind, but all experiences where the darkness is thick and profound. God's sheep do not always walk in bright paths, the way the wise and tender Shepherd leads may lie through very dark valleys; the path may be so dark that we cannot see ahead at all, we can scarcely see the Shepherd Himself, though we can hear His voice. It does not prove at all that because we are in some dark valley we are not His sheep, nor does it prove that He is not leading. Dark valleys may lie between one green and fat pasture and another

more green and rich and peaceful. I know that in my own past life the way into the most rich and peaceful pastures has led sometimes through the darkest valley, a valley whose darkness was like "the shadow of death," "the valley of the shadow of death."

2. But even in this dark valley Jehovah's sheep have no fears. "I will fear no evil," sings the Psalmist in the dark. It is not only while resting in the "pastures of tender grass," and walking "beside the waters of rest," and "in the paths of righteousness" that Jehovah's sheep fears no evil, but in the valley of deepest darkness as well. Every fear is banished on all occasions. A true trust in God banishes all fear, under all circumstances, for all time. Over and over again do we come upon this thought in the Bible (Isa. 12:2; 26:3; Ps. 3:5, 6; 27:1-3; 46:1-3; 118:6; Isa. 41:10, 13; Phil. 4:6, 7; Rom. 8:28, 31, 32, 34). Jehovah's sheep need never fear. They are as safe in the valley of the shadow of death as in the "pastures of tender grass," or "beside the waters of rest."

3. But note well the reason the Psalmist gives why he will not fear, "for **Thou art with me,**" not because there is no enemy and no

danger there, but because there is with us One who is mightier than any possible enemy; not because we are able to cope with any dangers we may meet, but because there is One with us who is able to cope with them (cf. Isa. 43:2; Rom. 8:31; Heb. 13:5, 6). In these words we have the one thought that banishes all fear from the Christian's heart, "**Thou art with me.**" If we could get that truth firmly rooted in our minds and keep it in our thoughts, it would banish all fears and loneliness and overwhelming sorrow forever. "**Thou art with me.**" Learn to say it today in a real way and not merely by rote. When you walk the streets by night and are in terror regarding what may befall you, look up into the Shepherd's face and say, "**Thou art with me.**" When you are out on the storm-tossed ocean in shipwreck say again, "**Thou art with me.**" When lying on a bed of sickness, perhaps nigh unto death, say again, "**Thou art with me.**" When out of work and turned from door after door as you seek employment, and all men seem against you, say again, "**Thou art with me.**" When you see every dollar of your hard-earned money swept away and you are forced to face an unsympathizing world penniless, say again, "**Thou art with**

me." When friends misunderstand you and turn their back upon you, and separate you from their company, say again, "**Thou art with me.**" When you sit alone with your dead, and not only your home is lonely, but your heart is infinitely lonelier, say again, "**Thou art with me.**" I am not sure but this is the sweetest word in the whole Bible, "**THOU ART WITH ME.**" It is not only a cure for all fears, it is a cure for all sorrows, all disappointments, all bereavements. What difference does it make whether it is in the "pastures of tender grass," or in "the valley of the shadow of death," if He is there? Rutherford once exclaimed, "Lord Jesus, I would rather be in hell with Thee than in heaven without Thee; for if I were in hell with Thee, that would be heaven to me, and if I were in heaven without Thee that would be hell to me." Note also that it is not until the Psalmist gets into the "valley of the shadow of death" that he speaks of the Shepherd's **personal presence**. He speaks of His grace and His feeding, and His guidance, etc., before this, but when he gets into the dark valley, it is **Himself**. This is true of the experience of most of us. It is in the valley of deepest darkness that we come to know His personal fellowship,

and it is no longer what the Lord does, but "THOU art with me." Praise God for the dark valley where we have what we could not have in "the pastures of tender grass."

4. **"Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."** The rod and the staff are the shepherd's implements for guiding and guarding the sheep. It is the thought of the shepherd himself near at hand to guide and guard in the dark valley that banishes fear and comforts the sheep. The Hebrew word translated "rod" means most frequently in Bible usage, "A rod of correction"; and our Shepherd's correction is most comforting to us, if we are wise. Sometimes it means "a sceptre," and nothing is more comforting to the Christian than Christ's sceptre, and every true Christian is longing for the time when it shall bear sway throughout the earth. But sometimes the Hebrew word translated "rod" means "a shepherd's crook," which is doubtless the primary meaning here. The Hebrew word translated "staff" means primarily that in which one depends, or upon which he leans, and is used of the staff David carried when he went to meet Goliath. Both the crook and staff with which Christ guides His sheep and wards off the enemy

is "the Word of God." How efficient and sufficient it is to ward off the wolf, lion and bear, appears from the history of our Lord Himself where Christ met and overcame the threefold assault of Satan with the thrice repeated, "It is written." Nothing comforts the Lord's sheep like the Word (Rom. 15:4).

III. EVERY LONGING SATISFIED.

In the third division of the Psalm the figure changes, Jehovah Jesus appears no longer as a Shepherd, but as a Bountiful Host.

1. **"Thou preparest a table before me."** These words taken alone would furnish a sufficient text for a long sermon. If there were time, it would be well to study all that Jesus has spread before us on this table, no banquet on earth like that. The millionaire's sumptuous feast for his friends sinks into utter nothingness in comparison. As to the general character of the feast read Psalm 63:5, "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips." And Psalm 81:16, "He should feed them also with the finest of the wheat, and with honey out of the rock should I satisfy thee."

Have you ever sat down at the table Jehovah spreads for His own? If not, you do not know what richness is. Some of the best things on the table are: (1) His Word (Jer. 15:16), that of itself constitutes a good many courses. "Sweeter than the honey and the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). (2) But there is something better than the written Word to feed upon, i.e., the Incarnate Word, Jesus Himself (John 6:55, 56). Did you ever feed on Jesus Himself?

2. Now notice where we are feasted, "**in the presence of mine enemies.**" Even Christ's own have enemies, any man who will follow Jesus will be hated (John 15:19; 2 Tim. 3:12), but our wonderful Host will spread us a banquet in their very presence. He is doing so constantly. That is one thing that makes the world so angry at the church, they see what a banquet the church has, and at the bottom of their heart they know that they themselves only have husks. This is one of the things that makes infidels so mad and so violent.

But there is something besides a feast, there is an anointing, "**Thou anointest my head with oil.**" Do you know what that means? From Acts 10:38 and Heb. 1:9 we find that the anoint-

ing is the anointing with the Holy Ghost, the anointing with "the oil of gladness," the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 John 2:20, R.V.). If you have received this anointing you will understand why it is that the Bible speaks of it as "the oil of gladness" (Heb. 1:9; cf. Gal. 5:22, 23). Jehovah Jesus just pours the oil over the head and it flows all over the whole person. In olden times the anointing was considered a necessary preparation for a great feast, and the anointing with the Holy Spirit is a necessary preparation for the Lord's feast. But we should remember that it is He Himself who does the anointing. **Thou** anointest my head with oil," and if He has not anointed your head with oil, let Him anoint you today. He longs to do it. The chief condition of that anointing is absolute surrender to Him to do it and simple trust in Him (Acts 5:32; Luke 11:13; Mark 11:24).

4. The next step follows naturally, inevitably, "**my cup runneth over.**" Of course it does. When you sit down at Jehovah's table and He breaks the alabaster box over you and the oil flows over your head and suffuses your whole person, your cup will run over, it will run over and run out to others to bless them (John 7:37-39). When

our Lord Jesus anointed the one hundred and twenty with oil on the Day of Pentecost, their cups so ran over that worldly onlookers thought they were drunk or hysterical or something of that sort; and very likely people will think that about you when you are anointed with "the oil of gladness." But at Pentecost also people found that it was real and the cup of the disciples so overflowed that three thousand drank that day, and if your anointing is real your cup is going to overflow to some one else. I have known people to get very happy, but there was no overflow, and I have wondered if it was really the Lord who has anointed them. If it had been really the Lord who had anointed them there would have been an overflow to some one else.

5. Now we leave the feast for our earthly pilgrimage, but we are not unguarded. **"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me."** We need no better rearguard nor foreguard than that. There are no better shepherd dogs than "goodness and mercy," and God's goodness and mercy follow us every step. The Hebrew word translated "mercy" is the word so often translated "loving kindness," and it is so translated in the American Standard Version of this verse. The

Psalmist had no question about it—"surely." How well protected and perfectly secure we are: the Shepherd picking out the path and leading the way, the Shepherd Himself close with us as we pass through the dark valley, and His own goodness and mercy following us. There is no real peril for Christ's sheep. And notice how long this will continue, **"all the days of my life."** David took little stock in a salvation or blessing or security that lasted a few days, or a few years, **"All the days of my life."** The goodness and mercy of Jehovah have followed me many years now, and I thank Him for it, but suppose they were to leave me tomorrow, next year, or even ten years from now, it would be unspeakably dreadful: but they will not.

6. Now we come to the end of our pilgrimage and pass out of time into eternity, **"I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."** The Psalmist could hardly have understood the full meaning of His own words. Like many another prophet, he must have wondered and searched what the Spirit of Christ that was in him did signify when he thus testified beforehand of the sufferings of Christ (see preceding Psalm, Psalm 22), and the glory that should follow (1 Pet. 1:11). These

words tell us that in God's house are many mansions (or abiding places), and elsewhere we are told that our Shepherd has gone to prepare a place there for us, and that when the place is prepared for us, and we are prepared for the place He will come again and receive us unto Himself, and that where He is, there we shall be also, forever with Jehovah Jesus (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:17). What a proof we have here, and indeed in the whole Psalm of David's inspiration. No one can deeply and honestly ponder this Psalm and ever have a doubt again of its Divine origin. "IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOREVER." Will that be joy? Will that be every longing satisfied? Listen to David again, "Thou wilt show me the path of life: **in Thy presence is fullness of joy**; in Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (Ps. 16:11). And still again, "As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness; **I shall be satisfied**, when I awake, with beholding Thy form" (Ps. 17:15). Listen to Him still again, "One thing have I asked of Jehovah, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of Jehovah all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of Jehovah, and to inquire in His temple" (Ps. 27:4). And listen to another Psalmist,

"Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but **God** is the strength of my heart, and **my portion for ever**" (Ps. 73:25, 26). Listen also to Paul, "We are willing to be absent from the body, and to be **at home with the Lord**" (2 Cor. 5:8). Listen to Paul once more, "To depart and be with Christ . . . is very far better" (Phil. 1:23). "In the house of the Lord forever"—everlasting fellowship and communion and companionship with God. We say even now, "My cup runneth over," but what shall it be then?



